

***“Proper Entertainment for Horse and Man”:***  
**The Middle Ford Ferry Tavern at Monocacy National Battlefield**

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**ABSTRACT**

In 2004, using a combination of oral tradition, historic research, and traditional field methods, archeologists discovered a mid-eighteenth-century tavern, the oldest recorded historic site at Monocacy National Battlefield. The tavern was associated with the Middle Ford ferry, constructed in the late 1740s to carry the Georgetown Road over the Monocacy River. When first established, the Middle Ford Ferry tavern was at the very edge of the western frontier, in an area known to colonial settlers as “the Barrens.” After the French and Indian War, however, Frederick, Maryland emerged as an important industrial and commercial center, eventually becoming Maryland’s second-largest city and the gateway to the West. The Middle Ford ferry and tavern remained active throughout this period of growth until they were abandoned around 1830. Archeological research at the tavern site provides a rare glimpse of a rural tavern, and also provides insight into the growth of transportation and commerce in the Potomac River backcountry.

**Introduction**

In 2003, National Park Service archeologists began a multi-year archeological identification and evaluation study of the Thomas Farm, one of six component properties that comprise Monocacy National Battlefield just south of Frederick, Maryland. Named for its Civil-War owner, C. K. Thomas, the Thomas Farm figured prominently in the Battle of Monocacy, fought on July 9, 1864. The farm also has a colorful pre-Civil War history that reveals much about the early settlement of Frederick County. Indeed, one of the most important results of the Thomas Farm study was the discovery of the Middle Ford ferry and tavern, both of which were in operation by the middle part of the eighteenth century. Excavations during the 2004 and 2006 field seasons resulted in the discovery of the tavern’s original location, and subsequent research and analysis has revealed much about this important colonial site on the edge of the western frontier.

*The Middle Ford Ferry and Tavern on the Monocacy River*

When George Washington passed through Frederick County in 1791, he described the surrounding lands as “rather hilly, but...good, and well timbered...very rich & fine.” Equally important were the transportation arteries which connected Frederick Town with points south. The earliest of these were “the Waggon Road that leads from Frederick Town to the Mouth of Monocacy” – known today as the Buckeystown Pike – and a second road that provided a direct route between Frederick and the warehouses and other commercial centers along the Potomac River. After the establishment of Georgetown in 1751, this new road became known as the Georgetown Road.

In March 1748, proceedings of the Frederick County Court reference the “new road” which crossed the Monocacy River at the Middle Ford. That same month, landowner Henry Ballenger entered into a contract with the county court to keep a ferry and to carry passengers and wagons for a nominal fee.

Ballenger sold his property to Richard Richardson in 1751, but as Richardson was not personally involved in the operation of the Middle Ford ferry, the Frederick County Court appointed Thomas Beatty and William Griffith to manage it. Beatty and Griffith then contracted with Daniel Kennedy, who probably operated the ferry day-to-day. The first reference to a tavern at the site appears in 1754, when Kennedy was awarded a license “to keep a house of Entertainment in the County of Frederick in the late Dwelling House of Richard Richardson.” In 1755, Kennedy’s license was renewed for “an Ordinary or Publick House of Entertainment at the place where he now lives.” The presence of a tavern at the site of the Middle Ford ferry was customary as regulations in many colonies made it mandatory for ferry operators to keep taverns for customers who braved the hazards of travel in rural areas.

Frederick County’s commercial importance continued to grow and by the middle of the eighteenth century, Frederick Town had “200 Houses & 2 Churches [... with] Provisions & Forrage in Plenty.” The onset of the French and Indian War in 1754, however, interrupted the area’s population growth and commercial progress. As Maryland’s closest settlement to the western theater of the war, Frederick Town became a center for military operations against the French and their Indian allies.

In the spring of 1755, British General Edward Braddock dispatched two columns of troops from Alexandria to rendezvous at Fort Cumberland. One column, the 44<sup>th</sup> Regiment under Sir Peter Halkett, marched through Virginia, while a second column, the 48<sup>th</sup> Regiment under Colonel Thomas Dunbar, marched through Maryland. Colonel Dunbar turned northward at Bladensburg and crossed the Monocacy River at the Middle Ford ferry on April 17, 1755. Journal accounts kept by members of Dunbar’s 48<sup>th</sup> Regiment recorded their river crossing at the Monocacy and noted that not only was the journey from the south over very hilly roads, but that the river, being swollen with rain, made the process of ferrying the troops and supplies over the river slow and arduous. So, it is possible that Dunbar’s men were entertained at Daniel Kennedy’s tavern while they waited for passage.

While the presence of several hundred soldiers should have been good for the ferry business, records show that Braddock’s troops utilized the Middle Ford ferry at Daniel Kennedy’s own expense; on March 11, 1756, Kennedy petitioned the General Assembly “Praying an Allowance may be made him for the Ferriage of Fifty five Wagons with his Majesties Stores and for the Ferryage of Col Dumbars Regiment over Monocacy River.” The General Assembly was not particularly sympathetic and Kennedy’s petition was denied.

#### *James Marshall and the Middle Ford Ferry*

During the 1750s and 1760s James Marshall, an agent for a Glasgow merchant, acquired substantial landholdings in Frederick County. By the time of his death in 1803, he owned nearly all of the properties that today make up Monocacy National Battlefield. Marshall does not appear to have resided in Frederick County, however, until about 1770. While it is unclear where he initially resided in Frederick County, Marshall is believed to have constructed the large brick manor house – known today as the Thomas House – around 1780. This manor house was most likely his principal residence in Frederick County until 1799, when he is recorded as living in Frederick Town.

Like Henry Ballenger and Richard Richardson, Marshall does not appear to have been directly involved in the management of the Middle Ford ferry. Starting in 1772, a series of individuals were appointed by the Frederick County Court “to keep the Ferry over Monocacy at Mr. Marshalls.” The historical record reveals several cases in which these individuals defaulted on their obligations and were taken to court by Marshall. After several of these bad experiences, Marshall contracted with Robert Hammitt.

Robert Hammitt rented the ferry from Marshall starting in 1787, and like previous ferry operators, Hammitt also operated a tavern on the site. (A tavern labeled “Hammets” is noted on the east side of the Georgetown Road near the ferry crossing on the 1794 Griffith map of Maryland.) He, like other operators before him, got into trouble and appeared in court in August of 1787 “for keeping a ferry at Marshels ford on Monocasy without License.” Such an infraction could have serious consequences and carried a fine of up to fifty dollars. Hammitt pleaded poverty due to “numerous family” – indeed the 1790 census record shows he had at least seven children and four slaves – so the Council recommended a remission of the fine: After Robert Hammitt’s death in the early 1790s, his widow Rebecca agreed to continue to rent the ferry under the same terms as her husband. Rebecca subsequently remarried and her new husband, Jacob Wilson, took over operation of the ferry.

Primary references from 1797 also provide some descriptive details about the ferry boat and its construction. Wilson hired a builder named James Fitzgerald to construct it, and also paid for his transportation and “Accommodations in diet & lodging 19 days.” The boat measured 45 feet in length and was constructed of “Timber, Plank, Iron, nails, & Oakum.” Wilson also purchased 330 feet of 4 ½-inch rope in Baltimore and had it transported to the ferry site.

By 1800, James Marshall had moved into Frederick Town and his son, William Marshall, is recorded as living alone with three slaves in the Buckeystown District, most likely at the manor house as noted on the 1808 *Map of Frederick County* by Charles Varlé. Marshall died in the spring of 1803, and his children William and Chloe inherited the property containing the manor house as well as the Middle Ford ferry and tavern. In 1807, Chloe died and left William her share of their father’s estate. William Marshall apparently continued to be responsible for operation of the ferry, even though the Georgetown Road was chartered as a turnpike by the State of Maryland in 1805.

Colonel John McPherson purchased acreage from William Marshall in August 1812, which included the parcel with the brick manor house and ferry. McPherson was a substantial property owner and entrepreneur who purchased several parcels of land in the Monocacy area during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, apparently with the objective of undertaking major industrial and transportation development there.

The McPherson family’s purchases of property in the Monocacy area occurred around the same time as a number of other important changes and developments. As previously noted, in 1805, the Georgetown Pike was chartered by the State of Maryland, and around 1828, a covered wooden bridge

carrying the Georgetown Pike over the Monocacy River was constructed. The bridge was constructed just upriver from the Middle Ford ferry crossing and necessitated realignment of the Georgetown Pike slightly east. John Martineau's 1829 map of the proposed Monocacy Canal shows the location of the bridge as well as the new road alignment.

With the road realignment and construction of the bridge, the Middle Ford ferry and its associated tavern likely ceased operation; however, the 1829 canal map depicts an unnamed structure – probably the tavern – east of the old Georgetown Road, indicating that a structure still stood in that location after construction of the bridge. The timeframe of the realignment of the road, construction of the bridge, and abandonment of the tavern is also reflected in an 1837 deed referencing “the said old road now shut up,” suggesting that the road leading north from the ferry landing had been closed for some time.

### **Archeology at the Middle Ford Ferry Tavern**

Over the decades, the road and tavern have vanished into the landscape. So, in 2004 an archeological survey was undertaken to locate the tavern site. The focus of the survey was not only to determine the precise location of the Middle Ford Ferry tavern, but to refine our understanding of its period of use, and to determine the site's eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places.

Using conventional archeological field methods, the 2004 field investigations resulted in the discovery of the remnants of a structure along with a stone hearth and chimney fall. These features are believed to be the archeological footprint of the primary structure associated with the Middle Ford Ferry tavern complex and are just downstream from the original ferry crossing. Subsequent remote sensing revealed a number of other potential features, which were partially investigated during the 2006 field season. These investigations resulted in the discovery of a 2 foot by 3 foot midden feature just east of the main structure and containing a dense deposit of domestic refuse, architectural debris, and food remains dating to the late eighteenth century.

Excavations at the tavern site have also revealed much about the construction and occupation of the tavern. The structure appears to have measured approximately 15 by 20 feet and was likely constructed of log. Situated on a relatively steep slope, the building was probably supported by a brick foundation, and featured an asymmetrical stone chimney. Some form of interior finishing was present, as evidenced by whitewashed plaster fragments recovered at the site, and excavations indicate the presence of a partial cellar or crawl space. The structure was likely part of a complex which may have included a stable or a paddock.

The size and construction of the Middle Ford Ferry tavern is in keeping with structures of the same period elsewhere in the region. This is suggested by an inventory of tenant houses on Lord Baltimore's Conococheague Manor (in present-day Washington County), which reveals that approximately 77% of the buildings erected on the Manor (that is 130 out of 171 structures) were

constructed of round logs, and had an average house footprint of 17 by 23 feet. Chimney construction is infrequently noted in the Conococheague inventory. However, five stone-base chimneys are noted. Nearby Monocacy Manor (in present-day Frederick County) included 26 dwellings with a stone-base chimney.

Over 10,000 artifacts were recovered from the tavern site. While an in-depth analysis of the tavern site assemblages from the 2004 and 2006 field seasons is still being conducted, a basic categorization of materials has been completed. Architectural materials such as brick fragments, mortar, and hand-wrought nails constituted over 40% of the assemblage; fragments of glassware and ceramics accounted for nearly 30%; just under 20% were food remains such as bone and oyster shell; and a wide variety of personal items including buttons, coins, lice combs, thimbles, and shoe buckles made up the balance. Datable artifacts – particularly ceramics – indicate the site was occupied from the 1740s until about 1830 or so, confirming information contained in the primary historic record. As time and funding permit in the future, research into comparable rural tavern assemblages could also be conducted and contrasted with urban ordinaries.

### **The Middle Ford Ferry Tavern in Context**

The presence of a tavern at the Middle Ford ferry site was more necessity than luxury as long-distance travel in 18<sup>th</sup>-century America was hazardous and fatiguing, and colonial roads were often badly marked and poorly maintained. For instance, a 1798 coach passenger traveling through Washington, D. C. on the Georgetown Road remarked that the road seemed “recently cut out of the wilderness.” Inclement weather was often a factor as well with accounts noting trips “occasion’d by heavy Rains & high Winds which prevented ... crossing the Ferries.” As a result of these potential hazards, many colonies passed laws that “required ferry operators to keep taverns at their slips for the convenience of their customers.”

In Maryland, the need for taverns was recognized as early as 1662, when the General Assembly acknowledged that “there is a necessity of alloweing and Keeping Victualling howses for the Entertaynmt of all persons...And for want of such Victualling howses divers[e] persons are either exposed to greate hazards of their healths or much burthensome to particular adjacent Neighbours.” Maryland tavern-keepers were expected to provide “Sufficient accomodacon” for both man and beast, including “three spare beds, with covering, and sufficient stabling and provender for six horses at least, under the penalty of eight hundred pounds of tobacco.”

In most colonies, including Maryland, tavern proprietors were required to acquire and maintain a license. An individual usually presented an application by petitioning the county court, which generally involved posting a bond and paying a nominal fee. The county court considered a number of factors before granting a license, including the financial status of the would-be tavern keeper, the suitability of the proposed location, the number of taverns already in operation in the area, and the tavern keeper’s perceived ability to successfully discharge his or her duties. Most colonies permitted women to operate

taverns, and as a result, tavern-keeping emerged as one of the only legal occupations available to women during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As taverns proliferated, legislators became aware of the social ills their presence encouraged, such as drunkenness, brawling, prostitution, and gambling. Taverns, it was said, were “little better than Nurseries of Vice and Debauchery, and tend very much to encrease the Number of Poor.” As a result, colonial legislatures enacted laws criminalizing certain behaviors. For example, in many colonies, including Maryland, it was illegal to drink on the Sabbath and holidays, and it was also generally illegal to serve slaves, free blacks, apprentices, Indians, servants, and seamen without the permission of their masters or ships’ captains.

The quality of services provided at colonial taverns varied widely, particularly in rural areas. Southern’s tavern, for example, located at Southern Ferry on the south side of the Rappahannock River in Virginia, was described by one disgruntled patron as “no more than a mere Hut, full of rude mean people...every one...inflamed with liquor and exceeding turbulent and noisy.” However, some rural taverns could also be quite pleasant. While traveling through Maryland and New Jersey in 1797 and 1798, a Polish diplomat named Julian Niemcewicz “stopped for dinner in Tan[e]y Town” and found the inn to be “very good and the dinner tasty.” Traveling through rural Pennsylvania, Colonial Governor John Penn found a provincial tavern to be “worthy of a respectable country town” where he “dined heartily upon catfish, which the river plentifully affords,” and in the small town of Newport, Delaware, Penn found “proper entertainment for horse and man” in spite of the presence of “two rustics completely drunk and by degrees becoming less and less intelligible.”

The variable quality of services at rural taverns was primarily a result of location, but it may also have been a function of the nature of tavern-keeping in general. Outside of urban areas, most tavern proprietors engaged in other work, such as farming or shop keeping, and operated a tavern to supplement other income. A few of the leasing agreements for the Middle Ford ferry and tavern survive and indicate that the lessee was responsible for operation of the “plantation thereto adjoining” as well as the ferry itself, suggesting that operation of the tavern was a secondary function.

Tavern proprietors “often converted their own houses into ordinaries merely by posting a sign, serving liquor, and setting up additional beds for guests.” As a result, the variety of food and drink served in rural taverns was often simple; “whatever the tavern keeper had on hand for his/ [or] her own family and was willing to share.” Particularly in rural settings, seasonality played a significant role in the availability of fruits and vegetables, and preserved meats were not uncommon. In coastal areas, shellfish were commonly served. In fact, nearly three-quarters of the faunal materials recovered from the Middle Ford Ferry tavern site were oyster shells, perhaps reflecting what a French traveler described as the American “passion for oysters.”

The Middle Ford Ferry Tavern was likely similar in nature to these other rural taverns, a way station where food, drink, and lodging may not have been of the highest quality, but which provided a

welcome respite for the weary traveler who passed on the Georgetown Road. Indeed, the tavern and ferry continued to serve travelers on the Georgetown Road for nearly 80 years until progress led to its demise in the 1830s.

## **Conclusion**

The Thomas Farm Archeological Identification and Evaluation Study results of both archeological and historic research at the tavern site provide insight into the earliest settlement of Frederick County and the surrounding region, chronicling nearly 80 years of expansion and transformation. The study of the Middle Ford Ferry and Tavern also sheds light on frontier life around Frederick Town during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the study of rural tavern-keeping in general. Indeed, the tavern and ferry are illustrative of the vital trade and transportation routes which transformed an area known to colonial settlers as “the Barrens” into a gateway to the west, making the area strategically important to both the North and South during the Civil War. So, while the tavern and ferry disappeared long before the Battle of Monocacy was fought in 1864, they provide our Park’s staff a unique opportunity to interpret the development of Colonial transportation and trade as keys to understanding why the Battle took place here and to explore the rich history of the Monocacy Region.